To Honour Women's Day

Profiles of leading women in the South African and Namibian liberation struggles

Fight for an Africa
where women are not slaves,
Fight for an Africa where women
do not waste their lives;
South Africa in fact
is on its way,
to celebrate its freedom
and to honour women's day.

(from *POETS TO THE PEOPLE*
'Women's Day Song')

International Defence and Aid Fund for Southern Africa
in co-operation with
United Nations Centre Against *Apartheid*
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The International Defence and Aid Fund for Southern Africa is a humanitarian organisation which has worked consistently for peaceful and constructive solutions to the problems created by racial oppression in Southern Africa.

It sprang from Christian and humanist opposition to the evils and injustiees of apartheid in South Africa. It is dedicated to the achievement of free, democratic, non-racial societies throughout Southern Africa.

The objects of the Fund are:–

(i) to aid, defend and rehabilitate the victims of unjust legislation and oppressive and arbitrary procedures,

(ii) to support their families and dependents,

(iii) to keep the conscience of the world alive to the issues at stake.

In accordance with these three objects, the Fund distributes its humanitarian aid to the victims of racial injustice without any discrimination on grounds of race, colour, religious or political affiliation. The only criterion is that of genuine need.

For many years, under clause (iii) of its objects, the Fund has run a comprehensive information service on affairs in Southern Africa. This includes visual documentation. It produces a regular news bulletin 'FOCUS' on Political Repression in Southern Africa, and publishes pamphlets and books on all aspects of life in Southern Africa.

The Fund prides itself on the strict accuracy of all its information.

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Introduction

On 9 August 1956, 20,000 women from all over South Africa and representing a great variety of social backgrounds converged on the Union Buildings in Pretoria to see the Prime Minister of the apartheid regime. Many had come at great personal cost and in the face of concerted official obstruction. The issue which had brought them together was the regime's decision to extend the hated pass laws to women.

It was an historic and moving occasion:

> "All processions in Pretoria were banned that day, so the women walked to Union Buildings to see the Prime Minister in groups of never more than three. All Pretoria was filled with women. This was four years before the national liberation organizations were banned, and thousands of women wore the green and black Congress blouses; Indian women dressed in brilliant saris; Xhosa women in their ochre robes with elaborate headscarves.
>
> Union Buildings is designed in classic style, with pillared wings on either side of an amphitheatre on a hillside, with trees and gardens in steps down the hillside and a vista to the town far down below across a long avenue of lawn. The women slowly converged up this avenue and filled the amphitheatre. Their leaders went into Union Buildings and left hundreds of thousands of signatures on petition forms at the office of the Prime Minister who, of course, was not available to see them. Afterwards they stood in complete silence in the winter sun—even the babies on their backs did not cry—for thirty minutes, then burst into magnificent harmony to sing anthems, *Nkosi sikelel' iAfrika* and *Morena Boloka*. The singing, as they dispersed, echoed over the city, and the women began a new freedom song with its refrain Wathint' abafazi, wayithint' imbolodo uzokufa — 'Now you have touched the women you have struck a rock, you have dislodged a boulder, you will be crushed'."*

The 1956 demonstration shook the apartheid regime. It was impressive evidence of the power of angry but highly organized women and it marked an important stage in the growth of unity among all the oppressed. It represented, furthermore, the culmination of a period of concerted, countrywide mobilization and protest. In turn, the great march led to further determined struggle.

Over the years to follow, the South African government was to face increasingly daring and serious challenges. In Namibia, where it had since 1915 endeavoured to enforce its racial laws and practices in defiance of world opinion, the formation of the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO) in 1960 ushered in a phase of the liberation struggle which would by 1981 demand the deployment of 100,000 South African troops to retain apartheid's grip on the

**For their Triumphs and For their Tears—Women in Apartheid South Africa*, by Hilda Bernstein (IDAF 1978).

20,000 women gathered outside the Union Buildings in Pretoria on 9 August 1956.

illegally occupied territory. Here too, women were to play a crucial role as supporters, organizers and fighters of the national liberation movement and the armed struggle.

This book has been produced by the International Defence and Aid Fund for Southern Africa (IDAF) in co-operation with the United Nations Centre against *Apartheid*, as a tribute to the fighting women of South Africa and Namibia on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the pass law protest and of South African Women's Day.

The women whose lives and experiences are briefly described in the following pages have all made outstanding contributions to the struggle for a free, democratic and non-racial Southern Africa. All have endured personal hardship and suffering under apartheid. They have been banned, detained, tortured, imprisoned, driven into exile or have experienced other forms of victimisation. In the climate of repression and war which characterises South Africa and Namibia today, hundreds of other women who in other circumstances would be obvious candidates for inclusion in a book of this kind, must remain anonymous. The risks both to themselves, and to families, friends and colleagues, which could be brought about by international publicity at a time when their energies and skills are actively deployed in ongoing struggles inside Southern Africa, are too great.

The biographies below have been selected not just as those of individuals, but as representative of all the women who, throughout South Africa and Namibia, are carrying forward the banner of the freedom struggle in the townships, the houses, farms and factories of their employers, the regime's prisons and detention camps, in the bantustans, and from places of exile throughout the world. This book is dedicated to them.